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With development plan approved, the future of White Flint begins to take shape

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The Montgomery County Council on Tuesday unanimously approved an ambitious proposal to transform a large segment of [Rockville Pike](#) near [White Flint](#) into a vibrant, grand boulevard lined with villages where residents can live, shop, walk and play.

Montgomery's plans for the 430 acres, now a jumble of strip shopping centers and car dealerships, are part of a national movement to re-engineer older neighborhoods built around America's love affair with the car. The White Flint project, which could span 20 years or more, would be among the largest redevelopments of post-World War II suburbia in the Washington region. It is aimed at bringing smarter growth to a county with little undeveloped land seeking ways to accommodate a growing population already nearing 1 million, larger than the District.

The White Flint plan is built on novel thinking. Planners and developers think they can persuade at least half of the estimated 50,000 people who eventually would work in White Flint to stop relying on cars. The area, in a section of suburban Montgomery that developers call North Bethesda, is already served by Metrorail and is slated for a new MARC rail station. Eventually, it is to have its own civic green, circulator bus system, bike paths and walkways connecting communities and commercial centers.

The plan won support from environmental groups and advocates of smart growth and transit-oriented development, as well as from many in nearby communities, although some worry it still will bring too much traffic. If the developers ultimately build what they propose, White Flint would become the most densely populated town on the Pike and a major center for new office space.

The new downtown at White Flint is the first phase of a broader remake of Rockville Pike from White Flint to Shady Grove in an area 20 times larger than [Tysons Corner](#) in Northern Virginia. The White Flint plan also could bolster Montgomery County's treasury by \$6 billion to \$7 billion from revenue over the next 20 to 30 years. With its new commercial and retail space -- and taller buildings -- White Flint eventually could overshadow downtown Bethesda and Rockville Town Square and dwarf plans for Shady Grove and Twinbrook.

"The future is improving upon many of our existing centers to make them more urban, more walkable, more transit-oriented, less automobile dependent, and overall far better as far as the environment is concerned, while making a major contribution to the future

economy of the county," said Montgomery Planning Board Chairman Royce Hanson, a key architect of the plan, just before the council voted.

'A different vision'

The approval of the White Flint master plan caps more than three years of often contentious debate about many issues, including the number of cars that should be allowed to back up at a traffic light to where a new public school should be built, whether bus lanes should be at curbside or down the middle of the Pike, and how many parking spaces should be allowed.

"This has been a tremendous effort," said County Council President Nancy Floreen (D-At Large).

There are about 2,400 homes in White Flint, many of them single-family. The new plans propose an additional 10,000 units of housing, including 2,600 affordable housing units, mostly high rise. Commercial, office and retail space could grow from about 14 million square feet to about 20 million square feet. Some buildings could be 30 stories high, or about 300 feet. The tallest in Bethesda is about 18 stories, or about 200 feet.

"It is a different vision for our county," said council member Michael Knapp (D-Upcounty), who chaired the committee that shepherded the master plan.

Some longtime residents, who have worked with county officials and developers to refine the plan, remain concerned about traffic, especially in the next five years when there will be substantial construction before promised amenities are in place. There also are concerns that the beleaguered [Metrorail](#) system may not be able to absorb demands for increased service.

"The basic concern we have is traffic," said Natalie Goldberg, a resident of Garrett Park Estates, who has been intensely involved with the county's redevelopment efforts. "Particularly in the short term, the infrastructure does not balance out the development," she said.

The plan imposes limits on the amount of parking, which will discourage auto use by making cars more expensive to store. Streets will be laid out, buildings constructed, a network of paths and parks built, all to encourage foot traffic, cycling and minimal car commuting.

Some developers in White Flint say they can submit their plans to the county later this year or early next year, and put shovels in the ground within two to three years which could move the project more quickly than efforts to transform Tysons into a new urban center for Fairfax County. White Flint already is a step ahead, since there are Metrorail Red Line stations along Rockville Pike. In Northern Virginia, construction of Metrorail's [Silver Line](#) to Dulles International Airport is expected to continue until at least 2016.

The smooth approval of White Flint redevelopment Tuesday stemmed from an intense, grass-roots organizing effort by a consortium of developers, who turned to social networking on the Internet in addition to traditional face-to-face lobbying and community meetings.

"A lot of work was done with the community," said council member Marc Elrich (D-At Large), a member of Knapp's committee. Elrich, a skeptic about county planners' traffic studies, pushed for tougher traffic standards at White Flint.

Defining the details

There is still much work ahead on White Flint. A plan by the county and developers to decide who will pay for the redesign of streets, parks and other amenities needs to be worked out, and the plan exempts more landowners than usual from paying county impact taxes. Details of how to discourage car travel still need to be hammered out.

The council took a step in that direction Tuesday, unanimously approving an amendment from member Roger Berliner (D-Potomac, Bethesda) to require more reporting by the planning agency about traffic, transportation, construction of needed infrastructure and whether the plans are working.

There are new developments on the Pike that foreshadow what is ahead. Just north of White Flint near Old Georgetown Road, developer LCOR has opened sections of North Bethesda Center, a high-rise office, retail, hotel and residential project, anchored by a Harris Teeter supermarket.

And south of White Flint Metro station, JBG has almost completed a \$250 million retail, residential and commercial project known as North Bethesda Market. Other developers such as Lerner Enterprises, which owns the struggling White Flint mall nearby, and Federal Realty Investment Trust, which owns Mid-Pike Plaza and other holdings on the Pike, also are gearing up.

"We are all well-capitalized developers who will be around for a long time," said Rod Lawrence, a principal of JBG who has been heavily involved in planning for the redevelopment of White Flint.